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ABSTRACT

An overview of issues in bilingual vocational education and language assessment is related in this paper to the Limited English Speaking (LES) Program at Mesa Community College (MCC). First, problems with traditional approaches to LES students are cited. Then, the goals of Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL) are discussed and necessary program components are enumerated, including vocational training provided in English and the student's native language, bilingual job-related instructional materials, and cooperation between vocational and ESL instructors. Next, research in second-language learning is reviewed with emphasis on the success of context-embedded approaches which focus on that which is immediately necessary, relevant, and useful for the student. Characteristics of LES students at MCC are considered next, including age, sex, marital status, place of birth, educational and vocational background, and vocational interests. A composite student profile is also provided. Next, questions are identified to be considered in choosing language assessment instruments, including who will be tested, for what purpose, what should the test measure, how measurements will be made, and what tasks should the tests require. Then, problems with proficiency tests are enumerated and assessment tests used by MCC are listed. Finally, recommendations on the selection of language-competency measures are made. (KL)

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LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT FOR LIMITED ENGLISH SPEAKERS IN VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS

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LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT FOR LIMITED ENGLISH SPEAKERS IN VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Abstract

This paper includes a brief overview of language assessment in general and will address the unique features of testing limited English speakers (LES) enrolled in vocational programs. The emphasis will be on what to assess and the coordination of assessment among ESL teachers, vocational instructors, and employers. Conclusions and recommendations will be offered based upon the experience and preliminary research results of the LES adult vocational program at Mesa Community College, Mesa, Arizona.

LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT FOR LIMITED ENGLISH SPEAKERS IN VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS

BILINGUAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Bilingual vocational training has developed in response to the needs of adults of limited English-speaking ability. Specifically, a person of limited English-speaking ability may have difficulties finding and keeping jobs because of communication problems with personnel managers, supervisors, co-workers, or customers. Similar problems may be encountered by these persons when seeking vocational education training.

The traditional approach for serving adults of limited-English-speaking (LES) ability is to provide them with English-as-a-second language (ESL) instruction prior to enrollment in vocational courses in which most instructors speak only English. However, persons whose only option is to take ESL prior to vocational training must postpone their vocational training. Thus, their entry or re-entry into the labor market also may be delayed. Bilingual instruction enables trainees who would not understand all of the instruction, if it were conducted only in English, to acquire vocational skills.

Bilingual vocational training is an instructional approach with the dual goal of enabling students (1) to acquire marketable occupational skills, and (2) to find and hold jobs in an English-speaking environment. To meet these goals, bilingual vocational training uses both the student's native language and English in the instruction and the English used in instruction is job related. Coordination of the ESL and vocational skills

instruction will help insure that the language skills taught are related to the English needs of the student's particular occupational goal.

Vocational English-as-a-second language (VESL) combines language and vocational instruction and avoids the pitfalls of the abstract and less relevant structures that accompanies a strict grammatical approach to academic ESL instruction. It provides the situationally-oriented English instruction necessary for entry into the job market. As such, it has been found to reduce the time necessary for English instruction by one third.

To summarize, the unique mission of bilingual vocational training is to provide limited English speakers with both job skills and English language skills with which to compete in an English-speaking job market. Essentially, the program consists of two learning components: entry-level vocational skills and the English proficiency needed to perform and interact successfully on the job. Because of the trainees' urgent need for gainful employment, the native language of the learners is used to enable trainees to acquire needed vocational skills.

A successful bilingual vocational training program would minimally include four components: (1) vocational training taught in English, (2) vocational training taught in the student's native language, (3) bilingual job-related instructional materials, and (4) cooperation and coordination between the vocational and ESL instructors.

Like the traditional ESL class, vocational ESL (VESL) develops listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. However, VESL differs from ESL in that language objectives are always contextualized into work-related situations; that is, the content used to teach each language skill is vocationally oriented (Robinson, 1980). The ordering of these skills is as

dependent upon the students' immediate employment goal as they are on the ESL skills they have already developed.

SECOND LANGUAGE RESEARCH

Research in second language learning has shown that language learning is most effective when it is highly motivated by communication needs and when it is a medium for meaningful content. A second language is best taught not as an object in itself, but by using it as a medium to teach something else (Krashen, 1978; Seelye, 1976). English taught as a goal in itself, isolated from the curriculum, is an empty exercise devoid of meaning. The point is that language must be bound to context and experience in order to be meaningful (Gray & Potter, 1981). Work in second language acquisition (Rivers, 1976; Mohan, 1979; and many others) points to the need to focus on content over form as the most effective route to long-term success at language learning.

Cummins' (1981) research with context-embedded (face-to-face) communication proficiency indicates that ESL learners attain near native English-speaker proficiency faster in context-embedded situations than in context-reduced (academic) environments and argues forcibly in favor of creating a language-learning environment in which the nature of the English to be learned and the manner in which it is taught is immediately necessary, relevant, and useful to the adult learner.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

THE BILINGUAL VOCATIONAL PROGRAM AT MESA COMMUNITY COLLEGE: STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

The diversity within the Limited English Speaking (LES) Program at Mesa Community College is quite broad -- a diversity which is "standard" in many bilingual vocational programs. Some of the demographic, educational, and socio-cultural characteristics of the students are:

Age

Students range in age from 18 years to 78 years. Grouping them into three main age groups, we have the following distribution:

18 years to 30 years -- nine students (9)

31 years to 41 years -- ten students (10)

51 years to 78 years -- seven students (7)

A common characteristic of bilingual vocational programs, one which distinguishes them from regular vocational programs, is the considerably higher proportion of women (Kirschner Report, 1980). In the LES Program too, the majority of students are female, 22 females and 4 males. The women, on the average, are above 35 years of age, while three of the four males are below 30 years.

Marital Status

Half of the students (13) are married. The remaining are:

Single: nine (9)

Divorced: one (1)

Separated: one (1)

Widowed: two (2)

Place of Birth

Sixteen students come from Mexico and the remainder, with the exception of three who were born in the Western United States, come from other Latin American countries.

Basic Educational and Vocational Background

The most substantial difference between trainees in bilingual vocational programs and those in regular vocational programs is in educational attainment. About 90 percent of enrollees in regular vocational programs had completed 12 years or more of school, while about 44 percent of trainees in bilingual vocational training had that much education (Kirschner, Final Report, 1980). The range of educational background in the LES program extends from one uncompleted year in the first grade to two years of college. The most commonly reported type of previous work experience by females is that of housework or other related work such as seamstress, cafeteria worker, or laundromat worker. Several students were well-paid, professional secretaries in their native countries and two of the men have had training in machine operation and technical drafting. Given the wide range of educational and vocational backgrounds, some students in the program cannot read or write in Spanish or in English while others rely heavily on the printed word for seeking out any and all relevant information regarding their future educational and vocational goals. Instruction and assessment have to accommodate these individual differences and consequent styles of learning.

A Student Profile

A typical student in our program would be: a 36 year old female who is married with four children ranging in age from four years to

sixteen years. She has completed eight formal years of education in a language other than English, and has never worked full time outside of her home. English proficiency has not been a concern because her support groups and environment have been Spanish-speaking. Now, however, her children are basically English-speaking and she wants to help them with homework and participate in their school activities but feels handicapped because of her lack of proficiency in English. To compound matters, recent financial concerns have caused her to look beyond her husband for financial support. She wants to learn English as quickly as possible and at the same time learn a job skill which will enable her to bring in needed funds. She is most interested in finding employment in the clerical/office field.

Vocational Interests

Our students are currently studying in thirteen vocational areas:

- Accounting
- Office/Clerical
- Counseling
- Data Processing
- Drafting
- Electronics
- Elementary Education
- Food Services
- Special Education (Handicapped)
- Home Economics
- Machinist
- Automotive Mechanics
- Secretarial

How do you assess language development given the diversity of educational and vocational experience among these students and in thirteen distinct vocational fields?

LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

Part of the difficulty of language assessment, whether in a vocational program or a distinctly academic one, is the lack of agreement on what the end result should be. That is, what is language proficiency and what are the appropriate criteria for determining it? Ulibarri et al. (1981) ask:

> Is language proficiency to be judged in terms of an abstract construct in which proficiency exists on a continuum according to theories of first or second language acquisition? Is it a minimally acceptable level of communication such as exhibited on the job or in the community? Or, is it a level of proficiency which has an empirical relationship to the type of language used in the classroom and to academic achievement? (Ulibarri, Spencer, & Rivas, 1981:49)

Each approach reflects a different type and method of testing the limited English speaker. The crucial point here is the reaffirmation of the fact that language is polymorphous; it is put to a multiplicity of purposes. Language assessment must reflect this multiplicity of purpose by assessing skills over time, by assessing a multitude of required skills, and by assessing in a variety of ways.

Prior to any assessment process specific questions must be asked, the answers to which will make the choice of particular instruments a less complicated process.

1. Who. Who are you going to test? A rather obvious question but one that is often overlooked in the language assessment process. What

are the characteristics of your particular group? For the language assessment of LES students in vocational programs, key questions to ask are: Are the students literate in their native language? In English? If not, assessment procedures must involve completion of tasks which do not involve the printed word. Some tasks seemingly involve merely listening but in actuality require specific levels of literacy. For example, one well-known test asks the student to listen to a question and mark the appropriate answer from among a choice of four printed in a test booklet--an impossible task for an illiterate to complete even if the original listening task was comprehended.

2. Why. Why are you testing? What are purposes for which the assessment results will be used? Going beyond obvious but realistic reasons such as it is required by your supervisor or the type of grant your program is under, it is necessary to clarify your reasons for testing. Your overall consideration for doing language assessment is what must this person comprehend and communicate adequately in some defined situation. You are trying to measure adequate performance for a particular situation at a particular point in time for this individual (Savingnon, 1972). Other reasons for assessment include the selection of appropriate learning materials, placement into particular groups or levels, and diagnostic feedback (including what students know and not just what they do not know).

Some tests are normed and referenced on native speakers and should be used judiciously with LES students. Test results will determine the degree to which non-native speakers approach native speakers in their ability to process and use the target language. If this is the reason for assessment in your program, this comparison should not be problematic.

If, however, your reason for testing is, say, placement, then a comparison with native speakers may not be valid.

3. What to test? A direct measure of the job-specific English skills which would be appropriate to all occupational areas does not exist nor is it a necessarily a desirable goal. Which areas to assess are highly determined by the student's specific vocational goal. However, in specifying the areas to test, it is helpful to remember that every occupation requires workers to function in relation to three things:

Data: The informational/input functions of the job, which can be visual (diagrams, charts, print) or oral

People: The interpersonal and managerial skills required

Things: The tools and implements of the specific job and job site (Smith, 1973)

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The language skill areas typically assessed in order of their importance in bilingual vocational programs are:

Speaking (oral production)

Listening (aural comprehension)

Reading Comprehension

Writing (including grammar and style)

4. How to test? Assessing these language areas can either be by direct measure or indirect measure. Indirect measures typically involve self-reports such as having a student fill out a questionnaire related to specific areas of language proficiency. An example of such a measure is

the MELP (Measure of English Language Proficiency). Direct measures are those in which the student responds to standard questions, requests, photographs or pictures under the control of a second person (teacher, aide, tutor, etc.).

5. What tasks to use? What kinds of tasks will assess these language areas? To assess oral production, interviews, often with photographs or pictures, are commonly used. Listening assessment will usually involve a dictation, recitation, or a physical response task. The cloze procedure (a process which eliminates every nth word from a passage and requires the student to fill in the missing words) is widely used to assess reading and, in fact, has shown to have a correlation with overall language proficiency (Alderson, 1979). Essays are still the most common way to assess writing.

A question often raised at this point is whether to assess each area separately or globally. The answer to this is to look again at the language required by the classroom and the job. To develop the necessary assessment instruments and the ways of using them requires an inventory of the functional language competence demanded in that classroom and by the particular job site. "Functional language competence is the underlying knowledge that allows people to use their language to make utterances in order to accomplish goals and to understand the utterances of others in terms of their goals" (Shuy, 1979:74). It includes a knowledge of what kinds of goals language can accomplish (the functions of language) and of what are permissible utterances to accomplish each function (language strategy).

Functional language competence also accounts for knowing what utterances cannot do. In English, the statement, "You are fired," works to fire the addressee but the utterance, "You are a frog," does not work to turn the addressee into a frog. (It also appears that language functions, unlike phonology and grammar, are developmental almost throughout life).

SOME PROBLEMS WITH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTS

A recent study (Dieterich et al., 1979) reported a number of specific areas in which tests fail to reflect the structure of English and the conventions that govern our use of the language for communicative purposes. Some of these problems are also reflected in the tests currently used to assess language proficiency in vocational programs. Among the problems encountered are:

1. The test may contain tasks that confuse oral language proficiency with literacy skills.
2. The test may equate language proficiency with the production of a large amount of language in response to particular test questions.
3. The test may infer a lack of ability, just because a student does not produce some expression that the test developers had in mind, even though the student's response may be a perfectly natural and correct one.
4. The test may require exact repetition or mimicry as a test of pronunciation or even of comprehension.

Being cognizant of these problems will enable you to select and devise language assessment instruments which are valid and reliable for your particular program.

ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS USED IN THE BILINGUAL VOCATIONAL PROGRAM AT MESA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The standardized, direct measurements tests used in this program are listed in Table 1. In addition to these instruments, observations at regular intervals are made to each vocational classroom and wherever possible, to potential job sites. The information gathered from these visits are used to develop in-house assessments pertinent to each student's particular occupational area.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The content of language competency measures should be based upon the content overlap between the curriculum and communication requirements of the job. That is, the skills measured should add up to a measure of language proficiency.

2. Language proficiency should be assessed:

   a. by multiple approaches rather than a single assessment procedure (paper-pencil tests, oral interviews, physical response, etc.).

b. at multiple levels of proficiency (basic, intermediate, advanced).

c. at multiple intervals (prior, during, and post instruction).

d. by measuring multiple skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing because language ability centers on a general factor rather than on componentialized abilities. A number of different tests will more likely give an accurate picture than any single measure.

e. by instruments which emphasize as much as possible the vocabulary and procedures employed on the job.

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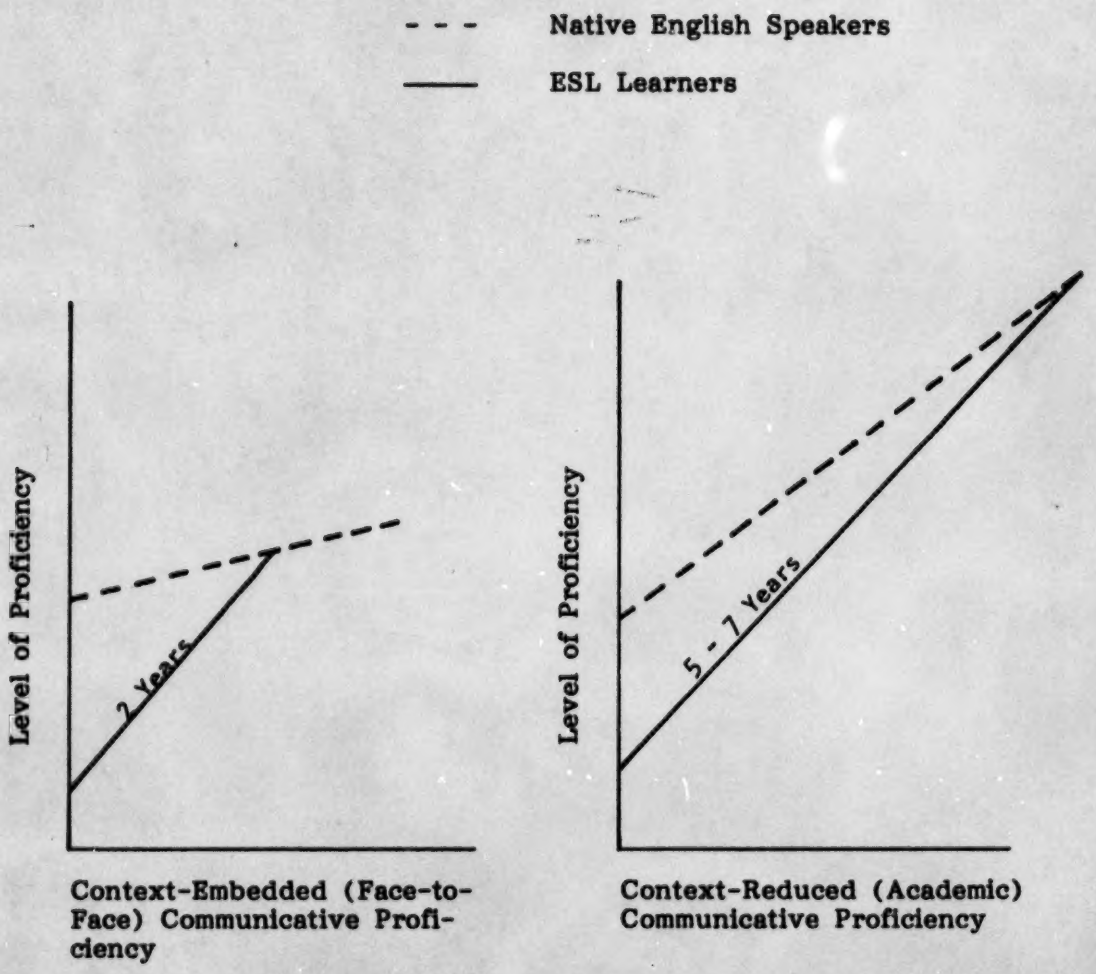

Figure 1.--Length of Time Required to Achieve Age-Appropriate Levels of Context-Embedded and Context-Reduced Communicative Proficiency (Cummins, 1981, p. 35).

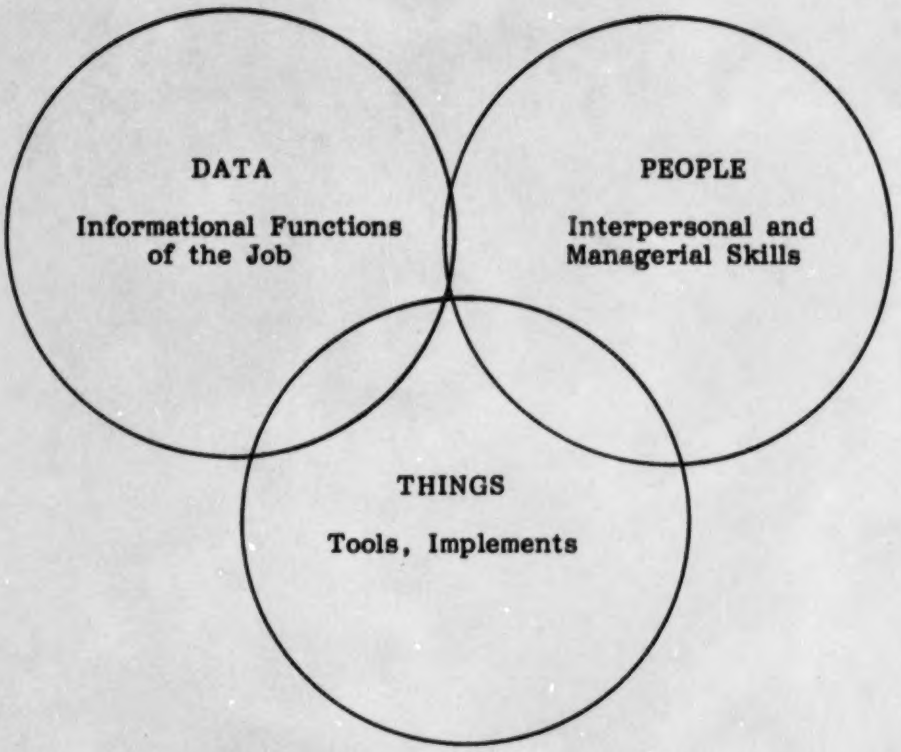

Figure 2.--Workers Must Learn to Function in Relation to Three Things.

TABLE 1

LANGUAGE SKILL AREAS (ENGLISH)

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Structure
Non-Literate	BVOPT LCPT *Indirect Measures	BVOPT *Indirect Measures	----- *Indirect Measures	----- *Indirect Measures	LCPT *Indirect Measures
Literate	BVOPT LCWT *Indirect Measures	BVOPT *Indirect Measures	Cloze Procedure *Indirect Measures	LCWT *Indirect Measures	STEL *Indirect Measures

BVPOT = Bilingual Vocational Oral Proficiency Test

LCPT = Listening Comprehension Picture Test

LCWT = Listening Comprehension Written Test

STEL = Structure Tests - English Language

*Indirect Measures include self (student) report and instructor, tutor, and other student observations.

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